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Introduction

Nathalie Sarraute is tireless in her appeal to a common experience: the inner world which she represents in her writing is, she insists, a world that we share, a world in which differences as they may appear on the surface simply do not count. No other writer asserts this commonality more strongly than Sarraute. And yet at the same time, she presents this shared experience within a frame that is equally assertive about its novelty, in other words, about its difference. The claim for sameness is made in terms and forms that simultaneously advertise their difference from what has gone before. This creates a curious paradox which is one of the factors that give Sarraute's writing its characteristic and uneasy vigour, and the energies produced by this tension seem inseparable from the anxiety that is palpable everywhere in her work. One senses in Sarraute a constant worry about the ways in which sameness and difference will be construed by those to whom her appeal to shared experience is addressed. There is a fear that sameness will be traduced as an assimilation into something alien, and an equal dread that difference will take the form of rejection and exclusion. Questions of sameness and difference are inextricably associated with anxiety in Sarraute. And yet, paradox and dread notwithstanding, there appear to be no other terms available to her for thinking experience.

This places her fair and square within the literary tradition of the twentieth century. Nathalie Sarraute and the *nouveaux romanciers* with whom she was for a while associated, were making a deliberate attempt to respond to what Alain Robbe-Grillet called 'l'époque [. . .] du numéro matricule' ['the age [. . .] of the regimental number'],[1] and to find ways of representing the condition of anonymity in which its subjects live. For Sarraute this anonymity is coterminous with 'le foisonnement infini de la vie psychologique et les vastes régions à peine déchiffrées de l'inconscient' which we all share ('L'ère', p. 67) ['the infinite profusion of psychological existence and the vast and barely explored regions of the

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unconscious' (p. 88)].[2] By the mid-twentieth century when Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet were making these claims, the novel had long since ceased to be a celebration of unique individuals or a mapping of social, characterological or even physiological differences, as it had been in the nineteenth century. If Balzac or Zola could claim scientific status for their elaborate fictional taxonomies, and if Flaubert could write of the novelist as being 'like God', their twentieth-century counterparts sought neither to categorise nor to master. Proust's narrator awakens on the opening page of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* to a world in which he remains in a state of radical disorientation as he charts the detail of his failure to recognise either the times or the places in which he finds himself. Gide presents his readers with situations devoid of any of the criteria to make the judgements which the behaviour of his characters nevertheless seems to invite. And one of the more sensitive and thoughtful of his characters is eventually driven to suicide because meaningful differences have vanished, and life appears as a series of infinitesimal gradations where the 'line of demarcation between being and non-being' can erupt quite arbitrarily at any point.[3] Moreover, if Sartre chides himself at the end of *Les Mots* for having written of the 'unjustified existence' of his contemporaries in *La Nausée* while exempting his own,[4] this is because, broadly speaking, literature's mission in the twentieth century has been to implicate itself in the phenomena it portrays, rather than stand above or to one side of them. In existential terms, literature and its creators have sought to participate in and to be indistinguishable from the undifferentiated world which they depict.

At the same time, it is precisely in this sense that literature claims to differ from most other discourses which tell us how the world is, for these appear from the perspective of literature to be based on a hubris of non-implication, particularly at the level of language and form. What makes literature distinctive in the modern world is not its exemption from the conditions of existence, but its awareness of itself as part of them. Self-consciousness rather than mastery marks the literature of the twentieth century. And the consequence of self-consciousness has been innovation. As the major novels of the twentieth century show, an awareness of fictional form has led to radical change in those forms; and in the process a different kind of difference from the one that marked the nineteenth century has come to be the hallmark of the literary. The prospect of writing a sentence as banally conventional as 'La marquise sortit à cinq heures' ['The Marquise went out at five o'clock'] has the modern novelist quail: 'le cœur lui manque, non, décidément, il ne peut pas,' ['his

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heart fails him, no, he simply cannot bring himself to do it'] writes Sarraute ('L'ère', p. 70 [p. 90]). But where Valéry and Breton had invoked the sentence as grounds for abjuring fiction altogether, for Sarraute it acts as a goad to produce something different. The commonality inscribed in conventional fictional forms can only be read as cliché in the twentieth-century novel, and invoking a shared field of reference in these terms becomes nothing more than a sign of unthinking replication. Instead, difference becomes the index of self-consciousness, the guarantee of literature's awareness of its own implication in the things it speaks of. And it is this paradox which Sarraute's work exemplifies in a particularly acute form.

Paradox, as I have already suggested, tips over into anxiety in so far as the text's appeal to sameness at the level of psychic content and its assertion of formal difference both assume an other to underwrite its claims. Sameness and difference become entangled with alterity when the text comes up against the readers whose response it so urgently demands. The twentieth century had already moved the reader to the centre of the literary stage: Proust claimed that his readers would be not so much readers of his novel as 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' ['the readers of their own selves'], the book being no more than 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' ['the means of reading what lay inside themselves'].[5] Gide saw the whole business of writing as one that was necessarily completed by the reader for whom the prime interest of reading was precisely the participation in the text that it required of him: 'L'histoire requiert sa collaboration [du lecteur] pour se bien dessiner,' ['the story requires his [the reader's] collaboration in order to become fully apparent'] he wrote in his *Journal des Faux-monnayeurs*.[6] And Sartre, too, saw the reader as the ultimate component in the literary enterprise. '[L]a lecture est création,' ['reading is creation'] he affirmed, meaning that the reader's task is to 'create' what the writer merely 'reveals'.[7] For Sartre, to write is necessarily to write for the reader, to respond to what he calls the reader's aspiration, and to offer him the chance of enacting his own freedom. Yet for none of these writers did the reader's alterity pose any serious problem. As far as Proust is concerned, the work is either written in the language in which the reader reads herself, or it is not. The instructions for the corrective or completive moves that Gide demands of his reader are written into his text. And for Sartre writing offers the chance of release from the alienation which reader and writer share.

Sarraute, however, is painfully aware of the reader as an other whose rules of engagement and interpretation do not necessarily tally with

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those that her own writing proposes. The reader's alterity – his or her difference – is perceived as a potential threat to the patterns of sameness and difference for which the text is seeking the reader's endorsement. This problem does not just haunt the writing of the text or motivate the formal experiments that Sarraute devises, for it is also acted out in the situations that her works depict. The encounters between characters staged in the novels rehearse these fears over and over again in scenes of mutual incomprehension, misrepresentation or outright negation. It is rare in Sarraute's fiction to find two characters who see things the same way; and yet this is what each of them longs for from the other, and what the text desires of its readers. Instead, the inhabitants of Sarraute's fictional world find themselves forced into frames imposed on them by others, or absorbed into beings whose nature is repugnant and alien to them, or else simply obliterated and rejected. Sarraute's subjects find it hard to hold out against a difference in viewpoint which they can experience only as oppression or exclusion.

In foregrounding the problem of readerly recognition by this means, Sarraute may go some way towards mitigating its worst effects by implicitly inviting her readers not to make the same mistakes as her characters. But at the same time, in an era where we are constantly urged to acknowledge our differences (differences of gender, ethnicity, and so on) and to embrace alterity, Sarraute reminds us how risky any encounter with an other is, and also how strong the desire for an echoing voice can be. The result in her own writing is a constant and constantly uneasy engagement with issues of difference, whose very anxieties produce the contradictions and reversals which give her writing its peculiar stamp.

It is these issues and the contradictory and inconsistent forms that they take which this book seeks to explore, as it traces the moves by which Sarraute's writing swings between a fear of difference and an acknowledgement of its necessity. I shall not be using a single theory of difference to chart these swings, partly because no one theory would seem to be capable either of accommodating the variety of its manifestations, or of adequately accounting for the anxieties with which the phenomenon is associated in Sarraute. Moreover, while difference could be said to have been a central component of a great deal of thought in the twentieth century, the concept has been deployed in a whole range of quite distinct and not obviously connected contexts. In the preface to his *Différence et répétition*, Gilles Deleuze claims that the subject of his book is 'in the air', and in support of this claim he goes on to cite phenomena as varied as Heidegger's increasing preoccupation

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with the philosophy of ontological difference, structuralism's basis in differential systems, and the contemporary novel's concern with difference and repetition both at the level of explicit theorisation and at the level of actual technique.[8] Tempting as it might be to pursue the philosophical approach to difference as something that would encompass all these other approaches, philosophy inevitably leaves out of its concerns the manifestation of difference as it impinges on the social, that is to say on human relations. This is the sphere with which the novelist is traditionally concerned, and it is a tradition which Sarraute continues and elaborates. However, what marks Sarraute out in this tradition is her acutely developed sense of what it means to invoke difference within this context of social and human relations.

For this reason it seems sensible to take Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* as a starting point for thinking about difference, since, whatever its limitations (and I shall come to some of these), it treats language primarily as a *social* fact. Saussure's *langue* is 'the *social* part of language' which exists only by virtue of a contract between members of a given community.[9] 'Semiology', the science of signs which he envisages as the umbrella discipline for his structural linguistics would, he says, study 'la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale' ['the role of signs as part of social life'], and thus constitute a branch of social psychology and of psychology in general (p. 33 [p. 15]), that is to say precisely the social and human relations with which the novel has traditionally been concerned. And indeed, the scope of the project and also the confidence with which it is articulated have striking echoes of the fictional programme set out in the 'Avant-propos' of the *Comédie humaine*. Saussure and Balzac each promise an all-encompassing schema that will both emerge from, and offer an explanation for multiple differences. Balzac, for instance, describes his project as one that will provide a comprehensive mapping of differences:

> La Société ne fait-elle pas de l'homme, suivant les milieux où son action se déploie, autant d'hommes différents qu'il y a de variétés en zoologie? Les différences entre un soldat, un ouvrier, un administrateur, un avocat, un oisif, un savant, un homme d'État, un commerçant, un marin, un poète, un pauvre, un prêtre, sont, quoique plus difficiles à saisir, aussi considérables que celles qui distinguent le loup, le lion, l'âne, le corbeau, le requin, le veau marin, la brebis etc.
>
> [Does not Society, in accordance with the various milieus in which its effect is exerted, make of man as many different men as there are varieties in zoology? The differences between a soldier, a worker, an administrator, a lawyer, an idler, a scholar, a statesman, a shopkeeper, a sailor, a poet, a poor man and a priest,

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are, albeit more difficult to grasp, as significant as those that distinguish the wolf, the lion, the donkey, the raven, the shark, the seal, the sheep, etc.]

But, he continues, underlying all these surface differences there are basic principles of organisation which it is the novelist's task to reveal. So, he rhetorically asks: 'ne devais-je pas étudier les raisons ou la raison de ces effets sociaux, surprendre le sens caché dans cet immense assemblage de figures, de passions et d'événements' ['ought I not to study the reasons, or reason for these social manifestations, and discover the hidden meaning in this immense collection of figures, passions and events.'][10]

There is a similar combination in Saussure of a concern with differences in conjunction with a search for underlying principles. On the one hand, he says, 'Le mécanisme linguistique roule tout entier sur des identités et des différences' (p. 151) ['The mechanism of a language turns entirely on identities and differences' (p. 107)]; and on the other, language is wholly a matter of principles most of which – like Balzac's 'hidden meanings' – are unknown at a conscious level to its practitioners: 'Une langue constitue un système; [. . .] l'on ne peut le saisir qu'à la réflexion; ceux-là mêmes qui en font un usage journalier l'ignorent profondément' (p. 107) ['A language constitutes a system. [. . .] Its workings cannot be grasped without reflexion. Even speakers who use it daily may be quite ignorant in this regard' (p. 73)']. Both Balzac and Saussure assume that the apparently chaotic variety of surface phenomena can be explained by the recovery of some underlying system or set of principles which will map out the world in terms of meaningful differences, but which are available only to the novelist (Balzac) or the linguistic theorist (Saussure), and which those engaged in these phenomena exemplify, but do not themselves necessarily grasp. The broad similarity between the two projects (Balzac's and Saussure's) lends support to the idea that Saussure's semiology might have relevance to the novelist seeking to map the social world in terms of meaningful differences.

In many ways we see Sarraute's characters seeking to enact just this kind of approach in her novels: their passionate attention to the phenomena of social relations turns them each into versions of Roland Barthes's 'structural man' and his counterpart, *homo signficans*. In an early essay on structuralism Barthes presents the phenomenon (of structuralism) not as an all-embracing theory, but as an *activity* entailing a certain set of mental procedures and suppositions. Its object is man as the maker of meanings (*homo significans*), and its practitioners (typified as 'structural man') are those who use the procedures of structural analysis in order to

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produce simulacra or imitations of social and cultural reality which will reveal how its meanings work: 'La structure est donc en fait un *simulacre* de l'objet, mais un simulacre dirigé, intéressé, puisque l'objet imité fait apparaître quelque chose qui restait invisible, ou si l'on préfère, inintelligible dans l'objet naturel' ['Structure is therefore actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but a directed, *interested* simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible or, if one prefers, unintelligible, in the natural object'].[11] Both Sarraute as novelist and the characters in her fiction are perpetually engaged in trying to work out – and often precisely in terms of quasi-structural differential oppositions – what the conditions of intelligibility are in the world which she depicts and they inhabit.

The virtue of Barthes's gloss on the structuralism for which Saussurean linguistics provided the model is that by turning the theory into an activity he reinstates the individuals whom Saussure had excluded, and through this move structuralism itself becomes a part of the social life which it simultaneously seeks to make intelligible. To this extent Barthes quietly undoes the mastery that seemed to keep the differential system of structuralist theory separate from the phenomena it presents. This question of mastery is one also addressed by Derrida in his discussion of what he calls 'différance', which, like Barthes's structuralist activity – though with different emphases – presents difference as a process rather than as a protocol or a blueprint:

> Tout dans le tracé de la différance est stratégique et aventureux. Stratégique parce qu'aucune vérité transcendante et présente hors du champ de l'écriture ne peut commander théologiquement la totalité du champ. Aventureux parce que cette stratégie n'est pas une simple stratégie au sens où l'on dit que la stratégie oriente la tactique depuis une visée finale, un *telos* ou le thème d'une domination, d'une maîtrise et d'une réappropriation ultime du mouvement ou du champ.
>
> [In the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field.][12]

Differences here can never be pinned down, and *différance* itself undermines key oppositions such as the ones between the sensible and the intelligible, or between speech and writing; it is poised between the temporal and the spatial senses of the word *différer*, and between the active

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and the passive senses of the suffix *-ance*. *Différance* is a more radical version of structuralism's theory of difference than Barthes's structural activity in the sense that while it is a process which produces effects of difference, differences as such are never available to be grasped or definitively mapped. Derrida everywhere foregrounds the elusiveness of the differential phenomena which structure our systems of meaning. And in other discussions of difference, he compounds this shifting quality by showing how oppositions are constantly undermined, first by the fact that they always entail a hierarchisation of their two terms and, second, by a tendency that the repressed term has of turning out to be integral to its opposite in any oppositional pair.[13] While Derrida excludes human subjects from his discussion of these effects, his account of the instability of differential phenomena parallels a discovery which is repeatedly made by Sarraute's characters, and which is integral to her own writing in its attempts to grapple with the organising principles behind social experience.

Nevertheless, Derrida's arguments about difference remain ultimately philosophical and are not presented primarily as relevant to human and social relations. For all his claims about the inevitable lack of mastery entailed by *différance*, he avoids placing theories of difference in situations where their articulation could be seen in the context of human and social effects, particularly as they are experienced by individuals.[14] For this kind of approach one needs to turn to a different kind of thinking about difference. One of the earliest critiques of Saussurean linguistics came from V. N. Vološinov who challenged Saussure's conception of the social on the grounds that it excluded the individual.[15] For Vološinov, like his co-theorist Bakhtin, the individual subject operates the language system within a social context which is always and unavoidably one of social – and linguistic – conflict. As a consequence, the particular language system that is mobilised by a given speaker in a given context is always just one, socially marked, language system that is inevitably at odds with others. Linguistic differences are inseparable here from social differences, and differences of both these kinds have to be negotiated by individual subjects every time they speak. The social and the individual are not the mutually exclusive alternatives that Saussure presented them as being, and every utterance is always perceived as an active intervention in a social situation. Seen in this light, all language use has what the English language philosopher J. L. Austin calls an 'illocutionary force', that is to say that a speech act is precisely that: an action performed by the utterance itself.[16] The absence of mastery here comes from the

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speaker's inextricable involvement in a social situation, and from the fact that speech is always an event, an intervention within such situations, rather than a detached, constative comment on them. As I have already suggested, this sense of implication in the phenomena it portrays is crucial to Sarraute's writing. But more than this, the notion that speakers activate different discursive systems, and that speakers and discourses alike are bound to find themselves in relations of conflict with other speakers and other discourses, is a major feature of Sarraute's world.

Difference in Sarraute is frequently presented as an aggressive – or at least assertive – differing *from*, and not just as a noteworthy – if occasionally disorientating – difference *between*. For this reason theorists of difference who deal with difference as dispute or conflict would seem particulary helpful in illuminating difference as it features in Sarraute's work. I have mentioned Vološinov and Bakhtin, but I shall also be evoking the work of Lyotard and Girard, both of whom – though from different perspectives – explore difference as conflict. Lyotard's concept of the *différend* addresses the notion of difference as dispute or dissent where difference arises out of the incommensurability of two versions of reality. More precisely, he is interested in those situations where one party has available an idiom or what Lyotard also calls 'procedures for establishing truth' which simply do not accommodate or recognise the experience or reality of the other party.[17] Conflict here exists because the terms of reference invoked by each party are not of comparable orders, and the differences at stake are differences that result from the mutual non-recognition of different discourses or idioms. This is difference of a different kind from the one implied in the binary oppositions of Saussure's structural linguistics, and it seems much more closely adapted to social reality and questions of human relations than Saussurean theory. Certainly, the conflict that results from the non-recognition of certain types of experience within established idioms is an integral aspect of the worlds that Sarraute portrays in her work; and in their dealings with others her characters are constantly alive to the possibility of falling victim to the kind of *différend* described by Lyotard.

There are, however, theories of difference that treat the assertion of difference itself as a kind of speech act or as an intervention in a situation whose effects are largely conflictual. For in many social situations an assertion of difference is tantamount to an act of exclusion. This is the scape-goating logic that Girard sees at the heart of sacrifice, and it means that for him difference has inevitably to be seen in relation to the violence that is associated with it.[18] The connection between difference

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and exclusion is also central both to feminism and to theories concerned with racial difference. Moreover, unlike the theories of difference that I have discussed so far, including those which one might call socially interventionist, both feminism and post-colonial theory speak *from* a position of difference.

The prime concern of feminist theories is to explore the social and political consequences of various definitions of sexual difference: biological, social, essentialist or cultural. Definitions of sexual difference prove to be inseparable from the social and political circumstances in which they are formulated. One of the chief merits of Simone de Beauvoir's *Deuxième sexe* is the way she brings out the political stakes in the construction of sexual difference by showing how woman is invariably presented as the 'Other' of man. Sexual difference, she argues, is constituted so as to make woman both dependent upon and relative to him:

> Elle se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel. Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu: elle est l'Autre.
>
> [She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, the Absolute: she is the Other.][19]

To define sexual difference by defining woman as 'other' is to oppress and exclude. Whether one responds to this by opting to affirm difference, demanding recognition for what has hitherto been marginalised in women's history, women's work and women's writing (as do Gilbert and Gubar, and Showalter, for example), or whether one refuses to accept the modes of thought within which sexual differences are conventionally constructed (as do Cixous and Irigaray), feminist thinking is constantly faced with the way in which difference in the field of gender entails some form of exclusion.

It is this potential for difference to be used as grounds for exclusion that Sarraute is particularly sensitive to in her work, even though it is never applied specifically and concretely either to women or to racial 'others'. As a Jew both in Tsarist Russia and in Occupied France, as a foreigner in France (by virtue of her Russian birth), and as a woman, Sarraute's own experience would seem to have provided her with ample grounds for understanding difference in these terms. The biographical information she provided for the *Chronologie* in the Pléiade *Œuvres complètes* makes issues of inclusion and exclusion a recurrent motif: her father was given special dispensation to live in Ivanovo-Voznessensk,

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